

## ***Guest Editorial***

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# **Mapping Indian Traditions in Translation: Concepts, Categories and Contestations**

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**(With inputs by Subha C. Dasgupta)**

In the Indian context, Translation Studies as a discipline or as a discipline at the interface of disciplines is yet to be conceptualized with reference to our literary history. The political boundaries of linguistic states in India do not coincide with their cultural boundaries due to the complex history of social and cultural formations in India. This has meant that the translational discourses of the Indian subcontinent have been rendered unintelligible in our institutional climate of debates and dialogues. The hegemonic role that English has played has further complicated the relationships between Indian languages, effectively sealing off a domain of interactive, subliminal relationships and creative dialogues that made large scale dissemination of myths, metaphors and discourses possible earlier. Indian literary history is a maze of meandering texts which reincarnate themselves in several versions and forms of retellings. Western theorizations and models of translation are inadequate to grasp or explain their manners of enunciation, circulation and reception. As we move backward in time, Indian literary history gets entangled in the history of translations which become part of a network of religious and political transactions. Translations, thus, are deeply implicated in the history of social and political formations as well as in narratives of identity. During the colonial period translation becomes the site where the politics of domination and subversion, assertion and resistance gets played out. We need a new paradigm of Translation Studies, a new way of

looking at translation as an act to understand this complex network of textual and cultural relationships.

The seminar on 'Indian Translation Traditions' sponsored by the Central Institute of Indian Languages headquartered at Mysore, and hosted by and held at the Department of English, Veer Narmad South Gujarat University, Surat during 10-11, March, 2006 was an attempt to explore some of the problems mentioned above related to literary translation in India from both empirical and conceptual perspectives. As the papers collected here will testify, comparative studies of pre-colonial Indian traditions may help us evolve alternative paradigms to account for what is culture-specific about the practice of translation in India. Avadhesh K. Singh observes in his paper that since we have always been multi-lingual, we have also been 'natural un/conscious translators'. There was an easy passage from one language to the other as cultural boundaries were 'fuzzy'. Notions of faithfulness as such were non-issues, but there were other kinds of tacit understandings within which transfers and retellings took place. For instance, as in oral narrative contexts, the core or 'the story as it was generally known' had to be preserved. It is less important to document changes in the target texts rather than to do so in the context of language usage and then also to map out the function of the translated texts in moulding tastes and shaping values both in elite and popular spheres. There are older texts in Indian languages talking about the role of such translations and it is important to bring them together or to talk about such retellings.

In his paper on Indian translation which was originally given as a key-note address to the seminar, Asaduddin identifies some of the major moments of translation in Indian history. During the time of King Akbar who had set up a *maktabhkhana* (translation bureau), we find a major initiative to get the classics of Sanskrit translated into Persian and Arabic. Prince Dara Shikoh (1615-1659) translated fifty Upanishads into Persian in his *Sirri Akbar* (The Great Secret)

which later went into French and English. It is significant that the translations done during the Indo-Muslim encounter were part of a dialogue between civilizations. Quoting Sisir Kumar Das Asaduddin comments that the Persian influence that was widespread in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Indian literature didn't leave any lasting mark. But it can be safely argued that forms like the *ghazal*, which has become integrated into the literary culture of India, are imprints of this encounter. The narrative tradition of prose romances such as *Qissa Gul Bakawali* and *Qissa Chahar Darvesh* informs the digressive and polyphonic narratives of some of the major modern novels in Urdu, Hindi and other Indian languages. Thus, translation makes available to us a repertoire of styles and modes which become part of a literary tradition. In the context of pre-colonial India this question becomes complex as translational practices are implicated in the competing ideologies of social and religious structures of power. This is convincingly illustrated by the papers dealing with Oriya and Kannada.

Dipti Ranjan Pattanaik and Debendra K. Dash trace the competing ideologies inherent in the practice of translation in medieval Orissa. Even within Orissa different geographical areas evidence different translational practices, depending on the nature of power relations they negotiate. The western part of Orissa with a considerable tribal population did not produce many translations while the southern part with its Muslim patrons had much literary activity. The authors demonstrate how translation was a means of affirming or resisting identities. The translation of a single text by three different authors such as Sarala Das, Balaram Das and Achyuthananda Das suggests that their own cult affiliations and ideological beliefs dictate their approach to the original texts as well as translational strategies. In Balaram Das's translation, for instance, his loyalty to the Vaishnava cult of Jagannath makes him view Rama as the seventh incarnation of Jagannath. Jaina *Ramayanas* retell the same narrative differently and from their point of view. Jagannath Das, the first Brahmin among the early translators in the Oriya

language, asserts his Brahmin identity in his translation by taking an essentialist view of life and the world. The twenty Oriya translations of Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* illustrate how the same text could be metaphysical and philosophical or sensuous and erotic or spiritual and devotional, depending on the translational strategies adopted. Priyadarshi Patnaik closely analyses a passage from *Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana* and its translation into Oriya by Jagannath Das. The original Sanskrit uses a rigid metrical pattern which gives the verse an aphoristic compression whereas the Oriya translation's free-flowing style is more suited to everyday recitation. There is a marked difference in the treatment of metaphors which occur both in the source and target languages.

The theoretical issues raised by the two papers mentioned above find an echo in the issues taken up by Satyanath and Tharakeswar for detailed investigation. Tharakeswar disputes the widely held assumption that translations empowered the regional languages of India and they enabled them to negotiate the hegemony of Sanskrit. He discusses the roles played by religion and state-formation in defining translational practices. He is of the opinion that the Bhakti movement in Kannada was not a product of translations but rather the movement gave rise to translations from Kannada into Telugu and Sanskrit. The nature of transactions between Indian languages and Sanskrit cannot always be described in terms of hierarchy and hegemony as the case of Kannada suggests. This idea is further reinforced by the *Vrathakatha* model suggested by Satyanath in his paper for the study of medieval Indian translations. He argues that categories such as gender, caste, religion, sect and language not only interconnect each other in the medieval context but at the same time insulate and protect the rights of communities over their knowledge and information systems. We need a different concept of literacy to understand the manner of circulation of texts in such a society. His illustrations of the religious and ritualistic contexts of these texts show how performative

traditions co-exist with scripto-centric (written) and phono-centric (oral) traditions. The question of orality complicates the very nature of the text since its boundaries remain fluid in ritualistic, performative traditions. Even as each group carefully preserved their control over their texts, a common epistemology made communication possible between different groups. The transfer of the oral to the written, in the context of bhakti, where divinity is mirrored through the subjectivity of the *bhakta* poet cannot be grasped through questions of equivalence or translation shifts alone. To read a bhakta poet, as Dilip Chitre puts it in his preface to *Says Tuka*, is to understand the “ritual choreography as a whole”, the poet as he thinks of God, as he pictures him in “various worldly and other-worldly situations”, pines for him and is finally, “possessed by Him”. He acts, “through language like God.” In his essay on the translation of Bhakti poetry with reference to Narsinh Mehta, Sachin Ketkar says that what comes alive mysteriously in a performance becomes inert when translated into written words. The oral text assumes a face-to-face audience and modulates the syntax to suit the performative requirements of such a situation. The written word uses a different discourse altogether since the addressivity of the language is shaped by the historical needs of a community. In the context of translating Indian Bhakti poetry into English more studies are needed to trace how languages shaped communities, their life and worlds through a shared vocabulary of experiences that fluently moved between multiple worlds. The secular and the cosmopolitan were not alien to this world of radical questionings.

In the pre-colonial Indian literary culture, translation signifies a creative appropriation of texts as part of socio-political negotiations, cultural assimilation and subversions. The translations celebrate the plurality of meanings inherent in the original and test the expressivity of the target language by stretching the metaphorical resources of the language to the limit. We need to evolve new perspectives and paradigms to describe these complex cultural and linguistic processes. The papers mentioned above raise some crucial

questions about the matrix of ritualistic performance embodied in the aural/oral traditions that lie beyond the discourse of contemporary theory. There are pointers to a new poetics of translation in the close readings of translations offered in some of these papers based on an intersemiotic view of literature. Translation is recognized on par with creation itself in this culture where meanings reincarnate and reinvent themselves in various variant forms. This is why *Vishnudharmottarpurana* suggests that it is not possible for any of the artistic expressions to exist in isolation – a knowledge of dance has to incorporate a knowledge of music, music that of painting, painting that of architecture and so on. A theory of translation based on scripto-centric transmission of metaphors and meanings is obviously found wanting in the face of such complex cultural transmissions.

The division of Indian literary traditions into pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial is convenient but it distorts the continuities that one comes across in the domain of culture. Many of the papers collected here follow this division as one of the givens in our situation. However, such a division seems to situate colonial experience as a primary point of reference. Poetry in Indian languages, despite modernism and its liberating influence on the formal patterns of articulation retains generic features derived from the remote past. In fact, the moment of modernism has been marked by recoveries of discourses from the past. A poet like Mardhekar uses the resources of medieval Marathi Bhakti poetry. This embeddedness of the past in the present renders linear divisions such as the pre-colonial and colonial largely irrelevant to the actual practice of translation. It is true that by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, English intrudes into the consciousness of the subcontinent and gradually makes it mandatory for Indian languages to reconcile themselves to its hegemonic status which comes to be reinforced through administrative and political measures. Both Asaduddin and Avadhesh K. Singh have indicated the trajectory of translations

during this time. Asaduddin suggests that the centre of gravity shifts from a Persian-centred literary culture towards an English-centred world view during the later half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Perhaps this shift needs to be investigated thoroughly.

With colonialism we enter a phase where translation itself needs to be conceptualized differently. Both Orientalists and Anglicists wanted to translate India into their respective 'languages' to reinvent it after their own models. Colonialism was a colossal project of translation where human beings and not texts became the object of translation. Asaduddin rightly says that the project of colonial modernity was made possible by translation. He comments: "Soon there emerged a section of writers and intellectuals who can truly be said to be 'translated men' in the most comprehensive sense." And like all translated beings we become asymmetrical entities haunted by the incommensurate nature of the inadequate equivalences we have to live by. The problem with post-colonial approaches to translation is that they fail to explore the process and project of subjectification inherent in 'colonial' translation.

In a nuanced argument, Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta points out how translation of poetry in the context of modernity complements one's sense of being in the world. For Sudhindranath Dutta translation is self-expression where the original poem is the experience you create. For Buddhadeva Bose the process of translation involves a merger with the original. Bishnu Dey locates the significance of translation in a moment of correspondence between the text and the socio-political context of its translation. This goes beyond Benjamin's perception of translation as a realization of some significance inherent in the original. The question these three poets confront in varying degrees is how far we are 'translatable'. Buddhadev Bose's idea of 'atmasuddhi' can be read against the grain to locate the site of translation within the self. This becomes even more apparent in Sudhindranath Dutta's idea of translator as 'Eklavya'. The solitary learner of archery has a

distraught relation with his own absent ideal he is conforming himself to.(Ekalavya, to recollect, was the boy in Mahabharata who, being denied being Dronacharya's student in archery goes on to learn archery on his own, keeping a portrait of Dronacharya and worshipping him as his absent teacher.) Translation becomes a mode of approximating oneself to and confronting an absence. It is during this colonial phase that 'translatability' becomes a major issue in translation in Indian literary culture. Why did this never haunt the translators of the period we describe as 'pre-colonial'? The predictable answer would be that with English the question of cultural difference becomes a gulf that cannot be transcended through our linguistic resources. But after reading scores of articles which deal with the 'problems' of translating 'Indian literature' into 'English' I feel that there is a deeper anxiety at work here. The articles by Sachin Ketkar, Rakesh Desai and Hemang Desai help us understand this anxiety. Ketkar demonstrates how Western theory cannot be of much use in negotiating the gulf between the ritualistic and the secular. Rakesh Desai comments on the translation strategies used by Narasinhrao Divetiya to create the discourse of Romantic poetry in Gujarati. To write about 'nature' in a particular way you need to formulate a new lexicon of experience as well as a new experience. In most of the Indian languages there are similar efforts to internalize the discourse of Western Romanticism by constructing a new self. Hemang Desai illustrates the nature of the gulf one has to traverse in the act of translating modern fiction and poetry from Gujarati into English. From clothes to kinship relations, from architecture to metaphysics the apparent asymmetry between experiential and imaginary worlds inform and haunt the inner recesses of translated works.

Here it may be argued that that there is a shift in the very nature of 'translational authority' while dealing with English either as a source language or a target language. The tradition of retellings and free adaptations in Indian traditions was never haunted by the



anxiety of authenticity. This was perhaps because they could be sure that the text would not translate them. In the precolonial period the ritualistic context allows translations to realize the possibilities of subtexts in the target language. Translating any text is finally a matter of locating its subtexts and it is here that English poses some of the basic problems. And English poses problems here largely because of its historical location.

There is a dialectical relation between English as the language that translates us and English as a language that we translate in. As the story of Tagore's self-translations would suggest, English regulates the subjectivity of the text to suit the requirements of Englishness as a colonial site. When Tagore realizes that he has not been translating his poems into English but has been translated by English into what he never was, he disowns his translations. I think this is a moment of post-coloniality in the Indian translation tradition. In other words, the 'colonial phase' was a period when English translated us into its epistemology. The translation of *Shakuntalam* uses the conventions of Romantic comedy and in the process produces a colonial text that corresponds to their world-view.

Nikhila's paper suggests that strategies of translation employed in creating genres like 'partition literature' which is deeply implicated in the narrative of nationhood and collective identities, misread and misrepresent the texts for appropriating them into categories that are arbitrary and misleading. The post-colonial moment, in this sense, is a moment of contesting Englishness through textual practices which would include translational (and sub-national) ones.

Ideally, post-colonial translation should involve a project of decolonization where subtexts will remain strongly Indian. What was described as pre-colonial translation was in this sense post-colonial. Perhaps Indian traditions in translation will always have to contend with the problem of colonialism in its various forms. The

post-colonial phase promises to open up a different way of evaluating translations of the last two hundred years. As has been shown for Marathi (Kimbahune, unpublished), Shakespearean plays which were successful on the stage were unfaithful to the text while those which remained loyal to the conceptual apparatus of the original were not stageworthy. There were about 70 adaptations/translations of Shakespeare into Marathi between 1850 and 1920. Just as *Rubaiyyat* of Omar Khayyam was translated into most of the Indian languages in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Shakespeare was appropriated in various forms in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in most of the Indian languages. A new literary history of Indian languages based on translational practices remains to be written. The paradigm of rewriting is particularly relevant when we discuss the adaptations of canonical texts like Shakespeare and Omar Khayyam in Indian languages. In his paper K.M. Sherrif suggests that Translation Studies could come closer to Culture Studies if they can profitably study ‘the vast uncharted terrain of cultural rewriting’ under whose rubric he includes a large variety of popular cultural forms such as film remakes, Harikatha and Kathaprasangam, a uniquely Kerala art form where a literary work is retold before a large audience with an emphasis on the sentimental and the sensational, to the accompaniment of music.

One of the effects of the ‘colonial’ phase of translation has been its disruption of the relationships between Indian languages. Asaduddin points out that in the last few decades most of the translations have been from Indian languages into English. The creative use of translation to negotiate the power structures of a living community is one of the salient features of the Indian translation tradition. In a forthcoming article on the making of literary culture in Malayalam between 15<sup>th</sup> century and 18<sup>th</sup> century, I have argued that it was through translations that Malayalam defined its specific identity distancing itself from Sanskrit and Tamil traditions. As articles on Oriya, Kannada, Hindi and Gujarati would

testify, translation has meant the creative assimilation of the other in the Indian context. In the first half of the twentieth century some of the languages such as Bengali and Marathi became languages of power largely due to the presence of major writers in them. In the second half of the twentieth century it is pan-Indian movements like Modernism, Dalit literature and feminist writing that have reclaimed the dialogue between Indian languages. This has also revived the relevance of the precolonial discourse of Bhakti. In the context of Dalit and feminist movements translation becomes a subversive act of resistance as well as a creative act of affirmation. Here it must be added that our celebration of Bhakti poetry very often does not take into account questions of caste, cult, dialect, literacy, ritual and several similar problems that are relevant to pre-colonial society. Scholars like Vivek Dhaireswar have argued that the use of post-colonial categories tend to misrepresent the whole experience of Bhakti poetry. The task of understanding some of these pre-colonial categories will require scholarship of a kind that is no more available within our academy. It is however necessary for Indian languages to recover the dialogic relationships between them. This is where theoretical discussions can prove productive.

The paper by Chandrani Chatterjee and Milind Malshe points to the possibilities of translation in an open world where translation becomes enabling and empowering. Two well-known American poets, Adrienne Rich and Phyllis Web find the ghazal form striking because it allows them to overcome the monologic elements of the Western lyric tradition. A genre is a way of validating a text. These poets use ghazal to challenge the conventions and authority of patriarchal American society. The translational process confronts the politics of the genre and also realizes the potential of the form in a different historical context. What is carried across in this cultural transaction is the intimate tonality inherent in the ghazal, a sort of 'person presence' that makes the form itself ideologically loaded. Translation has to be sensitive to this subliminal world of voices which are very often suppressed

when English is used as a target or source language. The example of ghazal suggests that translations from Indian literature have to be informed by an understanding of Indian literary traditions as well. It also illustrates that translation becomes productive when it involves a creative assimilation of the other. Perhaps this is the most outstanding feature of Indian translation traditions. Its revisionist potential is relevant to a world of asymmetrical power relations where culture will have to contest and negotiate inequality in one form or the other.

In conclusion, we hope that the issues raised in these papers will be taken up for further discussion and debate, and will be dealt with more substantially with reference to some of the literary traditions of India which are equally vital but could not be studied here due to unavoidable reasons. A separate volume of essays dealing with the medieval Indian translation scene seems to be a viable project, considering the complex nature of the field.

It is also time we recognized the ‘anxiety of translation’ in the context of English as a manifestation of its ‘authority’ that has deep roots in colonial cultural history. Translations of Shakespeare finally led to the emergence of the Indian proscenium theatre. The reception of Shakespeare in Indian languages is part of an Indian literary history that is yet to be written. The way he has been translated and received in sociocultural ethos is a significant comment on the receiving sociocultural ethos. We need both diachronic and synchronic studies across several Indian languages to map the uncharted expanse of Indian translation traditions.